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ABSTRACT

As the advertising industry has undergone many changes recently, advertising faculty may be wondering whether the set of courses they have been offering provides adequate preparation for the marketplace. A study examined two different approaches to curriculum review and explored their usefulness in two case studies. The first approach, Zero-Based Curriculum Review (ZBCR), is a 3-phase process. Phase 1 involves developing a review structure, which requires identifying a series of goals and objectives (overall curriculum goals, knowledge bases needed by students, desirable professional practices and skills) and then constructing a curriculum matrix that maps out the specific knowledge bases, professional practices, and student skills required to achieve those objectives. The actual curriculum review takes place in phase 2, where current courses are assessed in terms of their fit in the curriculum matrix. In Phase 3, the review results in implementation through course revisions. The second approach, benchmarking, is more focused. It involves comparing the curriculum to those of the best-in-the-class competitors. There are 3 major phases: (1) developing a plan; (2) collecting and analyzing the data; and (3) implementing the recommendations that emerge from the process. The two case studies show that ZBCR was a relative success and benchmarking was a relative failure. Analysis suggests that the failure of benchmarking, however, was not due to inherent flaws in the method. (TB)

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Advertising Curriculum Review:
Case Studies of Two Alternate Approaches

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Advertising Curriculum Review:

Case Studies of Two Alternate Approaches

Abstract

Many academic programs are faced with the prospect of curriculum review, and review methodologies abound. This paper describes two alternatives: zero-based curriculum review and benchmarking. Case studies from advertising programs at two universities, each of which undertook curriculum review using one of the two approaches, are provided to illustrate application of the processes.

Advertising Curriculum Review:
Case Studies of Two Alternate Approaches

Program assessment is a fact of life in American higher education. Legislative pressure at state universities has increased external demands for assessment (Haley & Jackson, 1995). Private universities face similar pressures from their stakeholders. And, many universities are embracing the tenets of total quality management, which includes structured comparisons with best-in-class organizations as an integral aspect of increased efficiency and effectiveness (Boxwell, 1994; Shafer & Coate, 1992).

While program assessment can take many forms (Haley & Jackson 1995), curriculum review should be a key interest for advertising educators. The advertising industry has undergone dramatic changes in recent years. Advertising faculty members in many programs may wonder whether the set of courses they have traditionally offered students provides adequate preparation for the changing marketplace.

There are many approaches to curriculum review, each offering advantages and disadvantages to the faculty involved in the review process and the other groups with a stake in the review outcome (most notably current students and alumni, as well as advertising professionals). Unfortunately, faculty members often view the process of curriculum review as burdensome at best, and a waste of time at worst. This paper provides case studies of two different approaches to

curriculum review, offered as examples for other programs facing review to consider. We also include some generalized observations on factors that can make curriculum review a truly useful, or at least bearable, process.

Two Approaches to Curriculum Review

A 1982 study titled Program Review In Higher Education: Within and Without (described as "the first comprehensive effort to survey academic program approval and review in higher education" (Barak, p. 3)), offers some general principles for successful program review methods. An ideal program review system should be fair and comprehensive; use multiple criteria for assessment; be conducted on a regular basis; be organized so as to keep communication lines open between all participants throughout the process; emphasize positive as well as negative aspects of the program under review; be structured to facilitate implementation of recommendations; and maintain objectivity (Barak, 1982, p. 66-69).

The two case studies presented here illustrate curriculum review methods that had not been developed at the time of Barak's study, or at least were not in widespread use. However, both approaches exhibit the principles outlined above, and so offer ways to put the commonsense ideals described almost fifteen years ago into practice today.

The faculty members involved in the first case to be discussed did not set out to follow a pre-determined review

structure, developing a process that met their program's needs and orientation. Interestingly, their ad hoc approach follows the structure of zero-based curriculum review (ZBCR), a method outlined in detail by Paulsen and Peseau (1992). As the name suggests, ZBCR requires a willingness to start from scratch in rethinking a curriculum, eschewing assumptions that basic curriculum structure and course content will remain largely unchanged at the end of the review process. The other key component of ZBCR is review process involvement by outside parties in addition to program faculty. Paulsen and Peseau recommend an advisory board composed of program graduates working in the field, other professionals, and current students. The advisory group functions as both a source of original curricular ideas and an objective appraiser of current course offerings (Paulsen & Peseau 1992).

ZBCR is a three-phase process. Phase 1 involves developing the review structure, which requires identifying a series of goals and objectives (overall curriculum goals, knowledge bases needed by students, desirable professional practices and skills) and then constructing a curriculum matrix that maps out the specific knowledge bases, professional practices, and student skills required to achieve those objectives.

The actual curriculum review takes place in Phase 2, where current courses are assessed in terms of their fit in the curriculum matrix. This allows identification of topics

and skills not being covered in the current curriculum as well as those that are being covered in multiple courses. This process results in recommendations for revisions to (or elimination of) current courses and suggestions for new courses.

In Phase 3, the review results are implemented through course revisions and/or new course development and subsequent creation of supporting advising and recruiting materials. Faculty and advisory board consensus is critical throughout all phases so that everyone involved agrees with the overarching objectives, the tasks associated with the process, and the ultimate form of the curriculum, which may be dramatically different from the initial structure. This is achieved in part through on-going sharing of information (Paulsen & Peseau 1992).

Phase 1 of ZBCR can require a great deal of time spent in gathering information to help identify important professional skills and practices. While the external advisory board can certainly help in this area, the final determination of which skills and practices need to be learned by students rests with the program faculty. And, because ZBCR does not allow for shortcuts ("Well, this course is fine as is") or assumptions ("We have to teach X because we've always taught it"), it is necessarily wide-ranging in scope (Paulsen & Peseau 1992).

In contrast, the approach illustrated in the second case study, benchmarking, is much more focused. Simply put,

benchmarking involves comparing your organization's processes and products with those of best-in-class competitors in order to identify better ways of doing business. Xerox is usually credited with introducing benchmarking to the United States (Boxwell, 1994; Greengard, 1995), and the company has identified five major advantages related to the approach. Benchmarking (1) forces firms to look outside for ideas, (2) leads to new avenues of learning, (3) results in decisions based on facts rather than instinct, (4) often drives dramatic change, and (5) provides the impetus to become an innovator within the company's competitive set rather than an imitator (Boxwell, 1994).

As is the case with ZBCR, there are three major stages in benchmarking: developing the plan, collecting and analyzing the data, and implementing the recommendations that emerge from the process. The benchmark planning process is much simpler than Phase 1 of ZBCR. It involves determining which programs or processes will be benchmarked, selecting the factors to evaluate, and identifying the best-in-class firms. The data collection stage requires internal review of the company's own programs and assessment of the comparable programs at the best-in-class firms, a much narrower search process than that required by ZBCR. The final stage, implementation, includes recommending changes based on the results of the benchmark comparisons, communicating the reasons for those changes among the people who will be affected by them, getting agreement on the desirability of

making the changes and then following through, and concludes with reassessment (Boxwell, 1994).

Most widely-cited benchmarking successes (including applications at Xerox, Goodyear, and AT&T) come from industry (Boxwell, 1994; Greengard, 1995); in fact, experts estimate that 70% of Fortune 500 companies have regular, on-going benchmarking programs (Greengard, 1995). However, universities have had success in adapting the principles of benchmarking for both administrative and programmatic application (Hanson, 1995; Clark, 1993). In fact, benchmarking may be easier to implement in the academic setting because direct competition between academic programs is generally not as fierce as the competition between manufacturers of similar products. A true benchmarking study requires comprehensive information on the practices of the best-in-class comparison group; university faculty and administrators may be more willing to share that type of information than would be the case in the industrial marketplace.

Having established the basic framework of the two approaches, ZBCR and benchmarking, we now turn to case study examples of each.

Case Study 1: ZBCR at a Large Private University

Program Structure. The advertising department is one of seven professional undergraduate programs in a freestanding communications school. The school itself is one of eleven schools and colleges in a private northeastern

university with a total undergraduate enrollment of approximately 10,500 students. The school and all of its programs are ACEJMC accredited.

Impetus for Review. This two-year long curriculum review was instigated by a combination of four factors:

1. The advertising department faculty had been actively monitoring the changes in the marketplace, particularly the growth of interest in integrated marketing communications, changes in technology, and marketer budget shifts out of traditional mass media advertising into other forms of persuasive communication.

2. During informal exit interviews, a growing number of students in the advertising program had been expressing a desire for more copywriting courses.

3. A change in University administration had brought a new mission statement that called for all colleges and schools to become more "student-centered."

4. A new dean requested that all seven undergraduate programs undertake curriculum review.

While the last two points were obviously the primary reasons for beginning a formal review, the first two elements had created a climate where the advertising faculty were willing to consider curricular change.

ZBCR Phase 1: Goal Identification and Review Structure. The department's primary objective was to identify a curriculum that would meet both student interests and advertising/marketing communications industry needs. The

school has traditionally had strong ties with the various industries its graduates enter, and prides itself on a strong professional orientation.

While curriculum review was mandated by the dean, each department was free to select its own review method. In keeping with ZBCR guidelines, the advertising department developed an intensive four-part process which was highly industry-driven:

1. Two focus groups were conducted with professionals representing all of the traditional full-service advertising agency functions as well as direct marketing, public relations, sales promotion, and advertising sales. One focus group of senior-level executives took place in New York City. The second focus group was conducted at Fallon McElligott, Inc. in Minneapolis, with representation from across that agency. Both groups were asked to brainstorm on the skills required of entry-level advertising graduates and the kind of education needed for success in the marketing communications industries.

2. In-depth interviews with advertising agency media directors were conducted in New York City (at BBDO and Kirshenbaum, Bond & Partners, among others) and the university's home city. Respondents were questioned on the desired skills and training for entry-level media planners and buyers.

3. Additional in-depth interviews were conducted at Fallon McElligott, Inc. in Minneapolis. A range of agency

employees were surveyed, including top management, account managers, and people at several levels within the creative function.

A single interviewer (a member of the advertising faculty) conducted both focus groups and all of the in-depth interviews, taking notes during the sessions. In addition, all focus groups and depth interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The interviewer's notes and the transcriptions were then analyzed for common themes and recommendations.

4. Curriculum profiles were developed for 49 institutions offering advertising coursework. Each profile included basic information about the college or university: degree of admissions competitiveness, full-time undergraduate enrollment, type of academic calendar, number of full-time faculty and percent with PhDs, and full-time student/full-time faculty ratio. Information specific to the school's advertising program included department offering the major/concentration/emphasis, required courses, and elective courses. Where available, supplemental curriculum offerings such as student organizations, student publications, and structured internship programs were also included in the profile.

ZBCR Phase 2: Curriculum Review. Dramatically different curricular needs emerged from the analysis of the focus groups, depth interviews, and curriculum profiles. The existing advertising curriculum was a generalist program, with all majors taking the same courses, courses that

provided an introduction to media, research, and creative. The recommended new curriculum design offered students the choice of one of two distinct tracks: creative or management. While some course titles remained the same, content was modified. Other courses were dropped from the curriculum, and several new courses were added.

The department viewed the creative track as a means to establish a competitive edge over most other undergraduate advertising programs. Both tracks, in combination with the liberal arts underpinning required by accreditation guidelines, were appealing to the professional community. The focus group and depth interview results had identified a number of key skill areas deemed essential for those seeking to enter the industry. These included strong business writing skills (the professionals indicated that they did not have the time or resources to work with new hires on their writing ability and that this was something universities should emphasize), numerical and analytical literacy, and an appreciation and understanding of the creative process. Both focus group participants and depth interview subjects were in favor of the two-track system, though they emphasized that students in both tracks needed to have the opportunity to understand the other area (i.e., creative students should understand what happens on the management side and vice versa).

ZBCR Phase 3: Implementation. The school's rules mandated a four-step approval process for curricular change.

First, the department faculty had to achieve consensus on the need for change and the nature of the changes, in consultation with a discussion leader from one of the other school programs. This person was charged with playing the devil's advocate, forcing the department faculty to question their assumptions. Consensus was achieved easily, since the faculty had identified the need for change before beginning the review process, and had similar views on the nature of the change needed.

Second, the department chairperson had to meet with the school's curriculum committee to present and defend the department's recommendations. The curriculum committee's primary responsibilities were to look for overlap with other courses/programs in the school, pinpoint the timing needed for phasing in any changes, and generally identify any problem areas.

After approval by the curriculum committee, the two-track proposal was presented to the school faculty for open discussion in a faculty meeting. At this time, the curriculum outline was supplemented with descriptions of each required and elective course, including course objectives and a list of course topics. These descriptions were developed by the individual faculty members who would have primary responsibility for teaching the course.

Following faculty approval of both the overall curriculum design and the specific courses, the final stage of the process was to present the curriculum revision and

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supporting course descriptions to the University Senate. Once approved by the Senate, the changes were introduced for entering students, and recruiting and advising materials were revised to reflect the new curriculum.

Resource Restrictions. No restrictions were placed on the department faculty. At the beginning of the review process, the dean guaranteed each department that approved curricular changes would be supported with the equipment and faculty resources necessary to deliver that curriculum. In fact, as a direct result of the thoroughness of the review process and the facts provided to buttress the curricular recommendations, the department chair received a $28,500 grant from the University to purchase needed equipment.

In addition, there were few resource restrictions on the review process itself. While the faculty member responsible for conducting the primary research did not receive release time (partly explaining the two-year duration of the review process), this person did receive travel and expense support. However, spending was minimal (less than $1000). Focus group participants and depth interview respondents did not request compensation; in fact, Fallon McElligott, Inc. provided a luncheon for the participants in the focus group conducted there.

Current status. As of fall semester 1996, all advertising majors will be following the new 2-track curriculum. There have been some changes in department faculty unrelated to the curricular changes, and the

department continues to fine-tune course content as a result. Students, faculty, alumni, and industry contacts are all pleased with the department's new orientation. In retrospect, the department chair feels that the review process may have been more extensive than was necessary. However, the comprehensive nature of the data collection process helped to reduce dissonance among both the department faculty and the overall school faculty, and those data continue to serve as an important resource when questions arise about the curriculum.

Case Study 2: Benchmarking at a Large State University

Program Structure. The advertising program is one of five undergraduate programs in a freestanding communications school. Four of the programs are professional in nature, while the fifth is a scholarly program. The school itself is one of ten schools and colleges in a state-supported northeastern university with a total undergraduate enrollment of approximately 11,000 students. The school and all of its programs are ACEJMC accredited.

Impetus for Review. This nine-month long curriculum review was instigated when the university administration implemented a requirement that all academic units benchmark at least one of their programs as a part of the yearly strategic planning and budgeting process. (The university had adopted a number of principles of Total Quality Management, including benchmarking.) After discussion in the school's own strategic planning committee, the advertising

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program was designated as the pilot for assessment of undergraduate programs in the school. While most advertising faculty members felt that the existing program was strong, there had been limited discussion about a need to examine curricular design, generated by informal student feedback and questions from the school's alumni advisory board and board of visitors.

Benchmarking Phase 1: Plan Development. The advertising faculty agreed on three areas for initial benchmarking: undergraduate curriculum, honors programs, and internships/placement. The curriculum review was the most thorough of the three, and the only aspect that will be reported here. Several specific curriculum-related factors were chosen for comparison: pre-requisite courses for advertising majors, advertising courses required for advertising majors, and advertising electives offered for advertising majors. Because benchmarking includes looking at the processes used to deliver quality in addition to quantitative comparisons (Boxwell, 1994), number of full-time faculty, faculty teaching load, class sizes in required courses, faculty-student ratios, and faculty rank mix were also identified as important process elements. Lastly, faculty research productivity and research support mechanisms were added as review elements at the request of the dean.

The advertising faculty agreed on the choice of three best-in-class institutions. Two were selected not only because of their perceived prominence in advertising

education, but also because they were members of a consortium of universities to which the study school belonged. The third was chosen solely on the perceived merits of its curriculum. (Interestingly, these same three programs were later identified as pre-eminent by two other researchers (Richards & Taylor, 1995).) All three programs were also housed in schools of journalism or mass communications.

Benchmarking Phase 2: Data Collection and Analysis. The three benchmark institutions were contacted by letter and asked to provide information on their curricula. Each readily complied; in addition, key people at each institution agreed to answer a series of follow-up questions. (Most follow-up took place via e-mail.) As noted earlier, benchmarking may be easier in the academic setting due to greater cooperation from the comparison institutions. That was certainly the case here, as the representatives from the three benchmark schools were unfailingly helpful.

Data analysis involved comparing the four programs in each of the areas outlined in Phase 1. All comparative information was obtained directly from the schools with the exception of faculty research productivity measures, which were developed by reviewing four sources: (1) the university's computerized listing of published books (1990 or later publication date), (2) a computerized "Table of Contents" search function which indexed articles in over 11,000 journals published beginning in 1990, (3) the 1990-94 issues of Communication Abstracts, and (4) the 1991-94

Proceedings of the American Academy of Advertising (the 1990 edition of the Proceedings was not available at the time of the study). While the researcher realized there might be some overlap in sources (particularly between (2) and (3)), this was deemed the comprehensive set of source material available through university resources. Listings in each source were checked for faculty members in each of the four advertising programs.

It is important to note that productivity comparisons are problematic, and often negatively perceived by faculty. While the counts produced for this benchmarking study provided some sense of comparative productivity, they were by no means all-inclusive. For example, book chapters do not show up in the sources consulted because they are not abstracted separately. Paper presentations at the annual meetings of AEJMC, ICA, and SCA could not be included because those organizations do not publish Proceedings. A more accurate representation of scholarly activity could might have been developed through examination of vitae of faculty at the benchmark institutions, but that level of comparison was not included in this study.

Once comparisons had been made, the results in each area were discussed by looking at four considerations. These considerations were adapted from benchmarking studies that had already been conducted by other units within the university; under the TQM approach, the benchmark team leaders for each academic unit were placed on a common

mailing list and were encouraged to share their approaches and results.

The first consideration, value to customer, examined differences in offerings across programs from the point of view of how those differences might benefit or disadvantage students in the study program. The second consideration was highest % of cost, which explored the resource costs associated with making changes to bring that particular aspect of the study program curriculum in line with the benchmark institutions.

The third consideration examined was greatest room for improvement. This part of the discussion focused on whether change was really necessary in the particular area (such as pre-requisite requirements), and, if so, what should be changed first. Pressures from market changes was the final consideration, which looked at the differences across programs from the perspective of both students and the advertising industry.

In general, the comparisons suggested that the study program's curriculum addressed important areas but offered students limited options beyond the basic courses. While the study program had five required courses, one of the benchmark programs had six, and each of the other two had seven. And, two of the benchmark programs offered advertising majors a much wider range of electives than did the study program. Teaching loads, faculty/student ratios, and class sizes did not vary widely across the four programs. However, faculty

in the three benchmark programs appeared to receive greater research support (in terms of both funding and assistantship help) than faculty in the study program.

Benchmarking Phase 3: Implementation. As in Case Study 1, one faculty member had primary responsibility for conducting the benchmarking study, although other faculty members assisted in making the initial contacts with the benchmark institutions. The faculty point person prepared a written report that detailed the benchmarking process and the comparisons between the programs. An initial draft was distributed to the other members of the advertising faculty. Their comments resulted in some editing and additional research, particularly in the research productivity section of the report.

An overview of the results was presented to the school's alumni advisory board and board of visitors. A more detailed look at the results was subsequently presented to the entire school faculty, and the written report was included in the school's annual strategic plan document. Presentation of the benchmark process and findings was a critical part of the dean's meeting with the university's strategic planning committee, which also had responsibility for resource allocation. The committee commended the school for its benchmarking efforts.

Unfortunately, implementation stopped after the presentation of results. The advertising faculty held several discussions, but were unable to reach consensus on

what changes, if any, should be made to the program curriculum in light of the benchmark comparisons.

Resource Restrictions. While the university mandate suggested that benchmarking results would be used in making budget decisions, no additional resources were promised. Comparisons with best-in-class institutions might well suggest the need for added faculty lines, equipment upgrades, or enhanced research support, but there was no assurance that those resources would be forthcoming. That restriction played a major role in the advertising department's inability to agree on curricular changes.

There were also some resource restrictions on the review process itself. As in Case 1, the faculty member responsible for conducting the benchmarking did not receive release time. Much of the data collection and analysis work took place over the summer; the faculty member did not receive any additional salary compensation. While industry benchmarking studies often involve site visits to the best-in-class firms, no site visits were made for this study.

Current status. The advertising department has made one curricular change: an advanced creative course which had been listed in the catalog but not offered for several years has been reactivated as an elective. As the benchmarking study indicated that lack of electives was an important disadvantage of the study program in comparison to the best-in-class institutions, this decision can be attributed, at least in part, to benchmarking.

Conclusions

The relative success of the ZBCR review outlined in Case 1 and the relative failure of Case 2's benchmarking study can be viewed in light of Barak's 1982 criteria for the ideal program review system which were given earlier. Both approaches met some of those criteria: the analyses undertaken were both fair and comprehensive (although some of the Case 2 faculty viewed the research productivity comparison as flawed); multiple criteria were used for assessment; emphasis was given to both positive and negative aspects of the study programs; and the faculty members responsible for data collection and analysis made conscious efforts to be objective.

The Case 2 situation had three key flaws in comparison to the situation in Case 1, none of which is inherent in benchmarking as a method. First, the impetus for the curriculum review came from outside the department, first from the university administration which mandated benchmarking, then from the school's own strategic planning committee who selected the advertising program as the pilot program in the school. While at least one member of the advertising department faculty felt that the timing was right for a reconsideration of the curriculum, that view was not shared by the faculty as a whole. Because there was no initial agreement that the curriculum might benefit from change, the review process was not viewed as particularly useful.

Second, faculty willingness to recommend curricular changes was hampered by the lack of resource commitment. While the dean indicated a desire to find the necessary resources, there was no guarantee that they would be made available in a timely manner.

Finally, in retrospect, there could have been much better communication between the faculty member conducting the benchmarking and other members of the advertising faculty during the review process. Problems arose in part because of timing: as noted above, much of the analysis took place over the summer, when other faculty members were not around. And, the advertising faculty had limited time (a week or two) to review and comment on the initial report before the presentation was made to the alumni advisory board and board of visitors. This further isolated the faculty as a group from the process, and may have increased the reluctance to act on the results.

We believe that both methods have merit for future curriculum reviews. ZBCR is a more comprehensive approach, but is also more time-consuming. By focusing on best-in-class comparisons, benchmarking both narrows and shortens the data collection and analysis phase of curriculum review. However, the fit between the review method and the "corporate culture" of the unit under review is an important mediating factor in curriculum review success. ZBCR worked in the first case in part because the program was already highly industry-oriented, while benchmarking was an appropriate

method in the second case due to that university's emphasis on rankings relative to other institutions. Ultimately, the key point illustrated by the two cases is that how the review method is implemented is at least as important a determinant of the ultimate usefulness of a curriculum review as the methodology itself.

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